“No family, no wife, no friends, no infidelities”: Wives Present and Absent in Naipaul’s Autobiographical Fiction

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[Abstract: V.S Naipaul’s 1987 novel The Enigma of Arrival is set in the 1970s in the Wiltshire countryside where Naipaul lived with his wife for ten years. In this novel, Naipaul has explicitly identified the narrator with his own ‘seeing eye, my feeling person’, while leaving out his personal relationships, and the narrator gives no hint of being married. In this paper I speculate on some possible structural and artistic reasons for this omission, and I read both this novel and A House for Mr. Biswas (1962) for implicit traces of his first wife and their marriage, contracted in 1955, which he explicitly excluded from this autobiographical novel.]

If he had called it autobiography, he said, “I think I would be run out of town, because there is no autobiography there – no family, no wife, no friends, no infidelities, nothing. That whole bit of life is torn out. There’s nothing about me apart from my writing.” (Gussow 16)

This is quoted from an interview with V.S. Naipaul by Mel Gussow in 1987, the year in which Naipaul’s book The Enigma of Arrival was first published. In this novel, set in the 1970s in the Wiltshire countryside where Naipaul lived with his wife for 10 years, the narrator never gives a hint of being married. As he mentions, he deliberately

leaves out all reference to his wife—and his infidelities; and, although there are some characters in the novel who are in a way befriended by the narrator, he doesn’t mention any of his friends from outside the local setting of the novel. Members of his family appear in the short final section of the novel, “The Ceremony of Farewell,” which recounts the rites following the death of his younger sister Sati in 1984. But it is true that the book is in no way “about” his personal world, in the sense of relations with the significant people in his life. There are occasional moments of intimacy, or at least of connection, with other characters, but for the most part the narrator is a solitary man. The interview continues:

The writer, the observer that is scrupulously myself. The minute other people are in the picture, that is where the fictive element comes in…In the other work, someone like myself is doing the writing or the observing…In this book, I do it in my own person. It’s closer to the truth, and I blend that in with my fiction. The autobiography is elusive, because the “doing” life, the life of the affections is not there.

(Gussow 16)

The “truth” which this represents is of its nature a very partial truth: a kind of rhetorical construction of truthfulness. Imraan Coovadia writes that “Naipaul’s power as a writer, unlike that of Shakespeare or Tolstoy, is more obviously a product of Naipaulian rhetoric than of Naipaul’s psychology or his imaginative powers” (4). There is nothing straightforward and unmediated about such “truth-telling”. And I believe that there is a link between the rhetorical choices Naipaul makes in The Enigma of Arrival and his decision to omit his wife and other close personal relationships.

Naipaul married Patricia Hale in England in January 1955, after he had been in the country for five years. According to his biographer Patrick French, although “he knew that Pat held him together emotionally” it was “without enthusiasm” that he decided to marry her. “In retrospect he thought they might have done better to live together” (152-3). But “they were both trapped by the formal taboos they had been raised with” (151) and in any case that would have been very difficult in the England of that time, especially for Pat. His lack of enthusiasm for the marriage was demonstrated in several ways: a ten-month delay in notifying his family in Trinidad—he knew they would disapprove—and his refusal to buy Pat a wedding ring, which was socially awkward for her, as a wedding ring was the public sign of respectability. He also lost their marriage certificate soon after the marriage. Decades later, he wrote, in a notebook, “I shouldn’t have married Pat … Her love was beautiful … The relationship—on VSN’s
side—was more than half a lie. Based really on need” (French 156). When he wrote that, Pat had been dead for five years, after a marriage of forty-one years during which she had suffered much from Naipaul’s neglect, infidelity and repression, as is well documented in French’s biography.

In *Enigma*, not only is Pat not mentioned, but throughout the book the narrator often implies that he is single. The fact that he always refers to “my cottage”, never “our cottage” could be explained by his feeling of masculine proprietorship. However, he underlines his single status in several other ways, for example: “After all my time in England I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man’s country, felt my strangeness, my solitude” (*EA* 13).

Everything in this sentence could be said of a married man until the telling last phrase, “my solitude.” Later on, discussing the wife of one of the farm-workers, a couple whose story later becomes important in the narrative, he writes:

I was nervous of Brenda. She had no great regard for me. She had her own idea of what was to be respected and the way I lived—a middle-aged man in a small cottage—and the work I did … didn’t fit into that idea. (*EA* 63)

Although he doesn’t say he is living alone in the cottage, the presence of his wife would be likely to alter the dynamics of his relations with this woman. Elsewhere in the novel, he claims to feel “protected, isolated, far from every wounding thing I had known” in the house in Gloucester where he stayed before moving to Wiltshire (*EA* 153). Ironically, this house belonged to a relative of Pat’s and they were, of course, staying there together. Although he might well feel “protected” and safe from harm as a married man, he seems to exclude his wife from the picture by speaking of his isolation (French 284).

Naturally, one should not expect even the most conventional autobiography to be “true” in an objective sense. Robert Hamner points out that when an author sets out to write in his own persona,

nothing may be taken for granted. … Though there may have been a time when criticism innocently supposed transparency in an author’s autobiographical testimony, that era has long passed. Autobiographical theorists now comprehend the appreciation any conscientious writer and critic must have for the substantial obstacles that stand between the subjective “I” and self-understanding. (38)

The question of what it might really mean that Naipaul says that the writer is “himself” is thus a complicated one; the “truth” of his account is at best partial. H. Porter Abbott suggests that “The difference … between an autobiography and a novel lies not in the factuality of the
one and the fictiveness of the other but in the different orientations toward the text that they elicit in the reader” (603). Abbott points out that readers come to hybrid works like these with different expectations. Some read them critically, or “suspiciously,” while others are more credulous, or “innocent”. Some readers may discount a novel like The Enigma of Arrival either because it is not fictional enough (e.g. that it is improper to use “real” people as the basis of characters), or that it is too fictional (e.g. that a certain incident or experience of the “real” narrator did not happen). Other, more literarily-knowing readers, perhaps, might protest that these readers are confusing factual and fictional writing. This novel is explicitly a hybrid between autobiography and fiction, and although it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to put it in a category, Abbott’s new term “autography” seems to provide an illuminating way of reading it:

To read autographically is to ask of the text: How does this reveal the author? It is to set oneself analytically apart from the author in a project that often succeeds in spite of him. Historical truth or falsity are important only insofar as they express the identity of the author. As it is always symptomatic, autography, unlike factual writing, is in this regard always true. And unlike fiction, which may or may not achieve an organic integrity of design, autography cannot fail to be organic and integrated, for the “author-cat” [a Mark Twain conceit] is there, in every line. (613)

Reading Naipaul autographically, one is therefore looking for the ways the author reveals himself, either intentionally or unintentionally. Naipaul is a very self-aware writer, and I suspect that most of the time he is quite conscious of what he is revealing and what he is keeping back.

“In the other work, someone like myself is doing the writing or the observing,” Naipaul said to Mel Gussow in the interview quoted at the beginning of this paper (109). Coovadia, in his book Authority and Authorship in V.S. Naipaul, makes an acute observation about the way Naipaul uses a narrator who is “like himself” (though different in significant ways) in the novel A Bend in the River: “Islam, which falls at once inside and outside Naipaul’s expertise … represents an opportunity to introduce complex autobiographical material that is nonetheless distanced from the novelist” (5). He argues that Salim, though similar in several ways to Naipaul himself – a member of a diasporic Indian family (in this case in East Africa) who leaves his home to live in a foreign city in the interior of the continent – is different enough to allow him to explore material he would not want to write about autobiographically:
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Salim, as a first-person narrator who shares a good deal of Naipaul’s own background and predispositions, can be seen as a device of compartmentalization, allowing the novelist to deploy in his fiction complicated and perhaps embarrassing material through a surrogate. It is precisely Salim’s Muslim religion that allows him to resemble his creator in many ways even as the reader—and, perhaps even more, the novelist—remains conscious of this one point of dissimilarity. One might say that *A Bend in the River* uses Islam as a device to liberate the novelist’s personal psychosexual experiences for literary purposes. (Coovadia 111)

Perhaps the religious difference is over-emphasized: there are, after all, several other significant biographical differences between Naipaul and Salim, and despite his name, Salim’s Muslim identity is not given great prominence. The part of this statement that particularly interests me is the assertion that Naipaul bases Salim’s relationship with Yvette on his own sexual experiences, an affirmation which Coovadia supports by referring to French’s biography. And French quotes Pat’s diary:

Next he wanted to write about Yvette and Salim. He said he was “nervous” of the sex. I said perhaps he did not need to write sex scenes but he said “I want to.” He told me he must be “left to myself,” be very private, as he will be “embarrassed.” (386)

French continues, “Avoiding any hint of pornography, he wrote truthfully about sex for the first time, drawing on what he had learned with Margaret” (386). So, read autographically, *A Bend in the River* can be seen as a way for Naipaul to write about his relationship with his long-term lover—or at least to use the material in his fiction. He talked to French about the violence of his relationship with Margaret: “I despise it passionately, despise it because it is very much an Indian failing. When I say Indian, I mean our community. And it’s always a sign of defeated people, isn’t it?” (French 388). This aspect of Salim’s personality is clearly an important element in *A Bend in the River*, and Pat reports that Naipaul was very careful when writing the scene where Salim hits Yvette to write in the passive—“‘she was hit’—‘I hit her’ would be to make Salim just a tough man” (French 387). Salim is, in this way, made to seem as much at the mercy of the violence as Yvette, in the same way that he believed he and Margaret were equally powerless. Reinforcing this impression is the way Yvette behaves after Salim has beaten her: she calls him when she arrives home, tells him to drink hot milk and try to sleep: “Never closer, never more like a wife, than at this moment” (221). This is also perhaps an example of what Coovadia calls Naipaul’s forceful exertion of authority over his reader. In this passage, which has the capacity to enrage any reader (and I include myself) who deplores violence against women, Naipaul, using the power of rhetoric and assuming the authority his rhetoric allows,
undercuts that anger by describing the scene in a way which suggests the complicity and sympathy of the victim, and emphasizes what the couple share rather than what divides them. Coovadia writes,

> Accomplishing such a reversal in his readers’ minds, even if it occurs only for the length of the paragraph, is a mark of Naipaul’s power as a novelist. A good deal of the imaginative thrill of reading Naipaul comes from such moments when such peculiar and anti-liberal propositions about ethics and human nature are injected into a reader’s mind. (51)

Coovadia is discussing an earlier passage in the novel here, where Salim is reflecting on the journey of Africans taken captive by slavers in previous centuries, and their positive gratitude at being rescued by their captors from the “strange Africans” in the lands they were traversing and taken to “safe homes across the sea.” However, the same kind of dynamic is involved in Naipaul’s flouting of readers’ expectations in the passage about Salim and Yvette. The “imaginative thrill” Coovadia describes does not imply that his readers will be persuaded to change their opinions or convictions that slavery and male violence are wrong and deeply offensive, but it demonstrates another way of looking at the world. Perhaps, like J.C.’s interaction with Anya in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, it might make one change “not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions” (106-7). This “anti-liberal” view of the world, whether it is in fact what Naipaul believes, has often been on stark display in public forums such as interviews and writers’ festivals, but in the fiction it is introduced in a more rhetorically ambiguous and less combative way, from the point of view of a fictional character who cannot be assumed to be speaking for the author.

*A Bend in the River* was written (with Pat’s help) while Naipaul was living in the cottage in Wiltshire which is the setting for *The Enigma of Arrival*. There are several possible reasons for excising all his intimate personal relationships, and in particular his marriage, from *The Enigma of Arrival*. One is that it was a deliberate act of disregard of the woman who had sacrificed so much for him, or even that it did not occur to him that she was important enough to mention. More charitably, it could be a form of delicacy, a decision not to expose his intimate relationships in a public forum. He himself provides another partial explanation, one based on his literary intentions rather than his personal attitude to his wife: “I thought I should make the writer be myself – let that be true and within that set the fictional composite picture because you can’t use real people to hang philosophical ideas about flux and change.” (Niven 163)
So, he implies, everything apart from his own subjective consciousness is, or could be, invented, although many of the characters in the novel are apparently easily identified with real people, according to French’s biography. I believe it is also possible that Naipaul leaves his wife out of Enigma because of the relationship he wants to develop with his reader. If he were not a solitary single man, he would not need a confidante. And he wants his readers—each one of us, singly—to be his confidante.

Naturally, this does not mean that the first-person narrator of an autobiographical novel can never be married. However, when Naipaul made the decision to use what he calls “my seeing eye, my feeling person” (Niven 163) to narrate Enigma, rather than to invent another character who would do the seeing and feeling on his behalf, he had to decide also not to include his wife in the narrative, because sheer truthfulness would force him to deal with the many complications and betrayals in their marriage, which would be a distraction from the novel as he conceived it. His intention in Enigma is not to write a confession: as Coetzee says in his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts”, “confessional fictions have come to constitute a subgenre of the novel in which problems of truth-telling and self-recognition, deception and self-deception, come to the forefront” (252). In Enigma, Naipaul is certainly interested in truth-telling and self-recognition, but I don’t believe he is so concerned with the problem of self-deception. Most of what he has said about this novel and his intentions in writing it indicate that he believes that if he writes honestly from his own perspective, acknowledging his own prejudices, then the truth-telling will naturally follow.

There are no explicit traces of his marriage in The Enigma of Arrival, although, reading “autographically,” we may be able to find that it manifests itself in other ways. I will come to that later, but first it may be illuminating at this point to go back to that earlier autobiographical fiction, A House for Mr Biswas, and consider some of the wives and marriages depicted in that novel.

At the start of the novel, before describing the birth of Mr Biswas, Naipaul includes a prologue describing the period just before his death. Mr Biswas’s wife Shama appears in this prologue as an important figure in his life, but one of some ambiguity. When he loses his job at the Trinidad Sentinel because of his bad health,

It gave Mr Biswas some satisfaction that in the circumstances Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help. Ten years before that would have been her first thought. Now she tried to comfort Mr Biswas, and devised plans on her own. (HMB 7)
Mr Biswas reacts with irritation to her suggestions, but, the narrator remarks,

He didn’t now care to do anything against his wife’s wishes. He had grown to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism. He trusted her. Since they had moved to the house Shama had learned a new loyalty, to him and to their children; away from her mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house. (*HMB* 8)

This frames and, to some extent, softens the portrait of their marriage that follows: the couple’s meeting in the Tulsi family store, Mr Biswas’s impetuous love-note and the unceremonious wedding that follows, and his fraught and rebellious relations with his wife and his numerous Tulsi in-laws. Although the novel is mostly narrated from Mr Biswas’s point of view, with some of the later scenes showing his children’s point of view, there is ample space for the third-person narrator to imply sympathy for Shama, who is, of course, trapped in this marriage as much as Mr Biswas is. There is a reminder, for example, of her youth:

Shama was a puzzle. Within the girl who had served in the Tulsi Store and romped up and down the staircase of Hanuman House, the wit, the prankster, there were other Shamas, fully grown, it seemed, just waiting to be released: the wife, the housekeeper, and now the mother. (*HMB* 159-160)

In a passage that follows shortly afterwards, it is claimed “there was no doubt” that “for Shama and her sisters and women like them, ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow” (*HMB* 160). In one way, this carelessly discounts Shama’s emotional intelligence, but it also draws attention to the difficulty of her predicament, being married to the rebellious Mohun Biswas, where duty to her husband is in constant conflict with duty to her family. And then there is the question of in whose mind “there is no doubt.” The phrase is a rhetorical flourish which challenges the listener or reader and sets up the possibility of opposition. In this context, Naipaul uses the phrase immediately after a sentence in which Mr Biswas’s subjectivity is foregrounded: “when her feet began to swell, Mr Biswas wanted to say, ‘Well, you are complete and normal now. Everything is going as it should. You are just like your sisters’” (*HMB* 160). It is subtle, but the controversial statement about Shama “and women like” her is set specifically in the context of this situation, and Mr Biswas’s reaction to it. The assertion of lack of doubt, already a
kind of challenge to the reader, is attributed in this way to Mr Biswas and is part of Naipaul’s portrayal of him as much as, or even more than, the portrayal of his wife. The slow shift towards an eventual sympathy and trust between the couple can be seen in the contrast between two episodes. The first is when the peer pressure at Hanuman House virtually forces Shama to destroy a doll’s house Mr Biswas had given to his daughter Savi. The reader can appreciate Shama’s conflicted position, and it is implied that Mr Biswas can too, though he doesn’t admit it. Later, when they are living in the crowded house in Port of Spain, Mrs Tulsi, after a violent argument, orders him to move out. The children can escape to school the next morning. Mr Biswas leaves for work: “He too was anxious to get out of the house. And as he left it his sympathy went out to Shama, who had to remain” (HMB 558). This may be the first time sympathy with Shama is actually expressed by Mr Biswas or, on his behalf, by the narrator, although it has been implied earlier. And for one brief moment, very late in the novel, when Mr Biswas is mortally ill, the focalisation moves to her. “Then Shama got another message one day, and when she went to the hospital she found it was much more serious. His face held a pain she could scarcely bear to watch” (HMB 588). To read these passages from A House for Mr Biswas autographically, we might see ambivalence towards marriage as a state, and to wives as people and their role in a man’s life—almost always from that masculine point of view—which is quite consonant with the facts of his own marriage. Because in this novel he is writing in the third person and using a free indirect discourse, as opposed to the confidential first-person discourse of Enigma, he is freer to reveal the intimacies of the protagonist’s emotional life and so might in the process be revealing, unwittingly or otherwise, something of his own inner feelings.

Naipaul may never have written directly about his wife in any of his fiction or non-fiction, but there is one scene in A House for Mr Biswas which could well be an indirect reference to a memory of their early days together. When Mr Biswas and Shama move to the house in The Chase, a village where they are to run a shop which belongs to the Tulsis, Shama is the first to pull herself together and behave “as though she moved into a derelict house every day. … She produced a meal from that kitchen in the yard. He could not look on it as simply food. For the first time a meal had been prepared in a house which was his own” (HMB 146). A House for Mr Biswas is based on “the story of a man like my father” (Naipaul, ‘Foreword’ 131), but in this fictional representation of the early days of his parents’ marriage, from a time of which he had no personal knowledge, there seems to be a memory of a scene which occurred in his own life a few years before it was written. In his biography, French quotes from an interview he conducted with
Naipaul in 2002, recounting the time in late 1953, just before their marriage, when Pat came to London to help him move into a new flat:

Pat came to London for the weekend and helped him move in to the house in Oxford Gardens. “So,” he remembered in old age, tears running down his face, “for the first time in my life, there was a semblance of a household of my own.” Pat cooked a meal. “It was a very, very moving moment for me, a sacramental moment. It was very beautiful. I have probably written about this in other ways in my work.” (152)

One of the ways he has written about it must be the passage quoted above, so we can detect a trace of his own marriage with Pat, which is absent from the account of his life during a time when they were actually married, in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

This leads me to ponder whether, when the autobiographical impulse led to the inner explorations of the 1980s in *The Enigma of Arrival*, despite the fact that he claims that he has “torn out” the “life of the affections” and excluded his wife from the book, some trace of her is to be found there, if we read the novel in such a way as to ask, How does this reveal the author? Perhaps in the intimate relationship he is cultivating with his readers, he implicitly reveals something of the preoccupations of his personal life.

There are several wives in *Enigma*. Naipaul’s narrator observes and comments on several marriages which he views from the outside. There is Brenda, the wife of the young farm-worker Les, who runs off with the central heating man and is murdered by her husband. She is described as something of a *femme fatale* “whose beauty caused pain to the man who at that moment was permitted to possess her” (*EA* 62), and who is aware of her power. Then there is the wife, never individually named, of the emblematic older farm-worker, Jack. Having got to know her a little, the narrator is surprised to find her capable of irony: “but then I had thought of her—and she seemed to have been content to be regarded—as an appendage of Jack’s” (*EA* 43). After Jack’s death, he observes her setting herself up in a new life in a nearby town, seeming to have felt Jack’s death as a liberation. “Perhaps,” he speculates, “in his own way he had been a tyrant, imposing … a style and a way of life that had been irksome to his wife” (*EA* 88). It is no doubt too facile to see that as a confessional comment on his own marriage, but the irony would not be lost on someone who has read French’s biography. The kind of rhetorical move which Naipaul makes in *A Bend in the River*, to surprise the reader out of a complacent liberalism, is not so evident in *The Enigma of Arrival*. The later novel
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...treats the reader much more as a trusted companion whose opinions he expects will accord with his own.

Mrs Phillips, with her husband Stan, looks after the manor in whose grounds the narrator lives, and its owner, whom he always calls simply “my landlord.” She and her husband are perhaps the closest friends that the narrator has in this novel, and even then they are usually described analytically, as one might talk to one close friend about some others: “Mr Phillips, the strong man, attracted people—like his wife, with her nerves—whom he had to look after” (EA 202). After Mr Phillips dies suddenly, she struggles on for a while but then one day she comes to the narrator’s cottage with the news that she is leaving the manor, and that she has met someone new:

It was strange. She had never been so easy with me, so without strain, the strain first of all her strangeness in the manor, her uncertainty with me, then the strain of her illness, then the strain of her solitude. And perhaps, as I thought now, the strain of her life with Mr Phillips, the man of great strength. And I, as if in response to her new personality, had never felt so close to her. (EA 304)

There is no more intimate moment in the novel than this, and it is partly in response to the thought that a wife might find her marriage a restraint and her husband’s death something of a relief. (There is also an odd echo of Salim’s observation, in Bend in the River, that he and Yvette had never been as close as when she rings him after his violent attack on her.) Another wife who is described more forcefully in terms of a strained marriage is Mrs Bray, the wife of the car hire man: “a very small, thin woman, a wisp of a woman, hardly there—as though life with Bray, the driver, the mechanic, the man with strong views, the hard worker … had worn her down” (EA 275). Bray has an affair, which the narrator hears about only through Mrs Bray. He speculates about the other woman: “I thought that part of the woman’s attraction for Bray would have been the absence of an overt allure. Allure in the woman might have made Bray uneasy, might have made him feel he was being used” (EA 280). But perhaps more revealing is the narrator’s reaction to Mrs Bray’s announcement of the existence of this woman, Bray’s “fancy woman,” is revealing:

The words, coming from that little lady, were shocking to me. I had known her for so long as a friendly, brisk voice on the telephone…. “Fancy woman” was awful—demeaning to her, demeaning to the woman she was talking about …. demeaning to her husband, demeaning … to all of us. (EA 276)

Mrs Bray is small and slight, with white hair, like Pat Naipaul—who was also, as we know from French’s biography, worn down by her dominant husband. Pat wrote in her diary, “He was once supposed to
have said to a woman … whom he had just met at a party, ‘It doesn’t matter what you think.’ He didn’t need to say that to me. He made it painfully obvious. … I felt assaulted but I could not defend myself” (French 441). She was also unhappily aware of her husband’s infidelity—including a much more long-lasting affair than Bray’s brief liaison with the woman in Salisbury.

In a 1991 interview, asked what his wife did, he replied, “She does nothing, nothing at all!” … laughing, as if the question were ridiculous. But later he admitted that he leaned heavily on his wife, reading to her each day’s literary output” (Winokur 124). Pat kept her diary for many years, often recording her daily discussions with Naipaul about his writings and her own reactions, but, according to French, “it tailed off during the 1980s” (441) so it does not record how she felt about his depictions of these marriages in *Enigma*. French believes that Naipaul’s difficulty when contemplating writing an autobiography “was that he was not willing or able to examine his own past behaviour…Vidia was not introspective, or introspective only on favoured subjects, such as his relationship with his father or with India, which he linked to his vocation” (415). However, without wishing to be reductive, I will just suggest the possibility that in some of his writing, including the descriptions of his parents’ marriage in *A House for Mr Biswas*, and in his musings on the various marriages he describes in *The Enigma of Arrival*, there might be a trace, conscious or unconscious, of his own marriage. It certainly seems quite established that his relationship with Margaret Gooding was the basis of his description of the affair between Salim and Yvette in *A Bend in the River*.

In *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul writes (through his narrator, of course):

> Twenty years before, when I was trying to write at the Earls Court boarding house, residence in the grounds of the manor would have seemed suitable “material.” But the imperial link would then have been burdensome. It would have tormented me as a man (or boy) to be a racial oddity in the valley. And I would have been able as a writer (at that time) to deal with the material only by suppressing certain aspects of myself – the very kind of suppression and concealment that narrative of a certain sort encouraged and which had led me, even as an observer, eager for knowledge and experience, to miss much. (*EA* 174)

Narrative of this sort Naipaul had mastered by the mid-1980s, but he was still, as French says, not “willing or able” to write about his private life in his memoirs or autobiographical fiction, despite using his personal circumstances in less autobiographical fiction, and making
some startling admissions about his sexual adventures made in
interviews: as he admitted to Schiff, “I became a great prostitute man
which, as you know, is highly unsatisfactory.” The omission of his
personal life does not make The Enigma of Arrival a lesser book,
however; just a very different one to a standard autobiography. And
much of the success of the novel depends on the relationship he
establishes with his reader, one of shared confidences, very much on
his own terms, as if he were walking with a friend through the manor
grounds and along the lanes of Wiltshire, sharing his acute and highly
idiosyncratic observations on the men and women, the wives and
husbands, amongst whom he lives.

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